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DIRECTORATE OF
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WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Moscow and the Georgians

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Moscow and the Georgians



A major crackdown appears under way in Soviet Georgia following the retirement of long-time republic party boss Vasily Mzhavanadze and the exposure of economic mismanagement and corruption of major proportions. Mzhavanadze, like Shelest in the Ukraine, was one of the few regional leaders who seemed to resist Brezhnev's emergence as the dominant man in the Kremlin; both went into political decline after Brezhnev consolidated his position at the 24th Party Congress. Although Mzhavanadze has not thus far been personally implicated in the charges of corruption in Georgia, there are rumors that his wife was involved, and it is clear that he is being held responsible for the situation there. He will probably be relieved of his candidate membership on the politburo at the next central committee plenum.

The scandal that engulfed Mzhavanadze involved the revelation of a vast network of individuals, in and out of official positions, who had amassed personal fortunes by misappropriating state funds, materials and land and by manufacturing and selling consumer goods, all quite illegally. Bribery, influence peddling, and kickbacks ensured the cooperation of those in the party and government whose job it was to prevent such activity. While corruption of this sort is not unusual in other parts of the Soviet Union, it was especially flagrant in Georgia, where a free-wheeling life style has combined with fierce national pride to breed indifference—if not outright disdain—for the finer points of communist ethics.

The character of Mzhavanadze's successor is good evidence that Moscow is serious in its intent to root out corruption in Stalin's homeland. The new party boss, Eduard Shevardnadze, earned his reputation as a tough crime-buster during his many years as head of the republic militia. His appointment to head the party is reminiscent of the choice in 1969 of Azerbaydzhani KGB chief Aliyev to take over and clean out the party after the exposure of widespread corruption in that republic. Shevardnadze's performance since he took over in September suggests that similar

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house-cleaning in Georgia is getting started. Given the aggressively independent nature of the Georgians, however, it is unlikely that he will be able to do more than eliminate the most glaring excesses unless he resorts to really harsh measures.

The Georgian Scene

The swashbuckling, colorful Georgians are immensely proud of their rich and ancient Christian heritage. Although their homeland was repeatedly overrun by foreign invaders—Byzantines, Persians, Arabs and Turks—their culture and language have been preserved intact. The Georgian language, for example, has changed so little

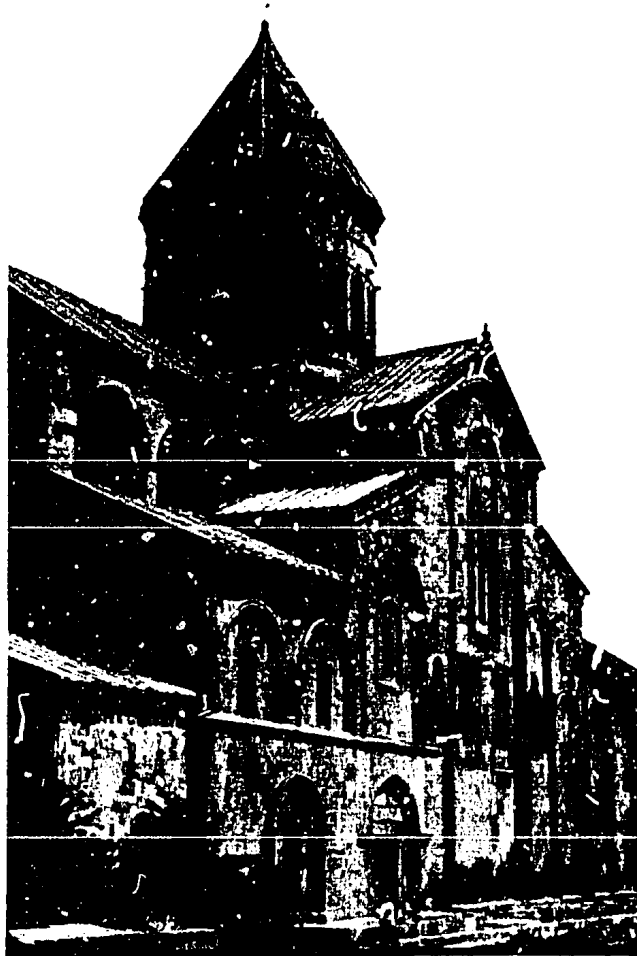
that school children today can easily read 12th century Georgian poetry.

Thanks to Stalin, the republic has always occupied a unique position in the Soviet Union. Although Stalin quelled all Georgian strivings for any real measure of independence from Moscow, the republic enjoyed a privileged economic status during his time, and the people are stubbornly—if somewhat perversely—loyal to his memory. For them, Stalin is still a national hero and a symbol of Georgian greatness. Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 denouncing Stalin touched off riots in Tbilisi that still stand as the worst civil disturbances in recent Soviet history. Since the riots, Moscow has made an exception of the Georgians and has permitted them to continue to honor the memory of their native son. Two years ago, for instance, the esplanade in Tbilisi was renamed after Stalin and his portraits now appear on city buses.

Furthermore, the Georgians were never Russified to the same extent as other Soviet minorities, and the republic's leaders are almost entirely native Georgians. There are only seven Slavs among the 123 full members of the Georgian central committee. Georgia is also unique in that it is the only republic where the number of Russian inhabitants has declined in the last ten years. The exodus was undoubtedly prompted by the strong anti-Russian sentiment among the Georgians, who have become increasingly outspoken in their practice of disparaging Russians and things Russian. There is, however, more sound than real fury in this attitude.

Life in Tbilisi has an air of vitality, gaiety, and permissiveness, both in the style of living and in the style of business. Georgia has the strictest anti-narcotics laws in the USSR and probably has a greater narcotics problem than any other area. Mzhavanadze is the only regional leader of consequence who has ever publicly mentioned the problem. Judging from the frequent complaints in the press, there are probably more illegal firearms in Georgia than anywhere else.

But most of all, it is the air of conspicuous consumption that marks Georgian life. There are



11th Century Church in Mtskheta

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reportedly more private cars per capita there than in any other republic. Collective farmers make a good living peddling produce from their private plots throughout the Soviet Union and the Georgians, particularly the residents of Tbilisi, seem to have money to lavish on good food and wine. The fact that Georgian affluence is often the result of shady business dealings is an open secret, and the citizens take pleasure in insisting that there are still millionaires in Georgia.

After Khrushchev, Provincialism

For the first few years after Khrushchev's ouster, Moscow's control over the provinces was relatively lax and assertiveness grew noticeably not only among the Georgians but among the other nationalities as well. The diffusion of authority within the collective leadership and the consequent difficulty in reaching agreement on any question kept the Kremlin from taking strong action against errant officials in the hinterlands. Regional leaders were able to find high-level patrons in Moscow and to play one leader off against another to protect themselves and their own regions.

Mzhavanadze was one of the more independent republic leaders and there was certainly little interference from Moscow in his handling of Georgian affairs.

25X1 Mzhavanadze [redacted] built himself luxurious private dachas in Tbilisi and in various resort areas in Georgia. He lived in high style. While he allegedly did not engage in corrupt practices himself, he did not prevent others from enriching themselves, with the result that underground business blossomed.

25X1 [redacted] In public his attitude was reflected in prideful remarks about the Georgian people; e.g., at the 24th Party Congress in 1971, most regional leaders echoed Brezhnev in extravagant praise of the Great Russians, but Mzhavanadze blithely took the opposite tack, pointing out that the recent Moscow celebration of the 800th anniversary of Georgia's greatest poet, Shota Rustaveli, had shown "enormous respect" for the "ancient and original Georgian culture."



Georgian Night Life

While there is no good evidence as to who Mzhavanadze's allies were on the politburo, his frequent references to close ties between the Georgians and the Ukrainians suggest a special relationship to Shelest. Mzhavanadze and Shelest—along with Kebin of Estonia—were the regional leaders who took a dim view of Brezhnev's efforts to enhance his own authority. Their opposition was reflected in the rather perfunctory references to Brezhnev in their speeches, in contrast to the lavish praise heaped on the general secretary by his supporters. While there were other reasons, a key factor may well have been the recognition by these regional bosses that any weakening of collective leadership would mean the emergence of a strong leader in the Kremlin who would in turn restrict their freedom to maneuver. Their fears were well founded; Mzhavanadze and Shelest found themselves isolated at

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Statue in Moscow of 12th Century
Georgian Poet Shota Rustaveli

the 24th Party Congress. Their positions were further weakened when Brezhnev emerged with his authority significantly enhanced.

Moscow Lowers the Boom

The first sign of serious trouble for Mzhavanadze came with the publication in *Pravda* on 6 March of a Central Committee decree criticizing the Tbilisi party organization for a wide range of shortcomings, including corruption, improper personnel policies and ideological and nationalist deviations. The appearance of the decree on the day after the anniversary of Stalin's death lent a particularly ominous note to the criticism.

and less talk. The ax began to fall. In May, city party secretary Nikolay Tskhakaya was removed for "errors" in his work. Tskhakaya was secretary for industry and was probably held responsible

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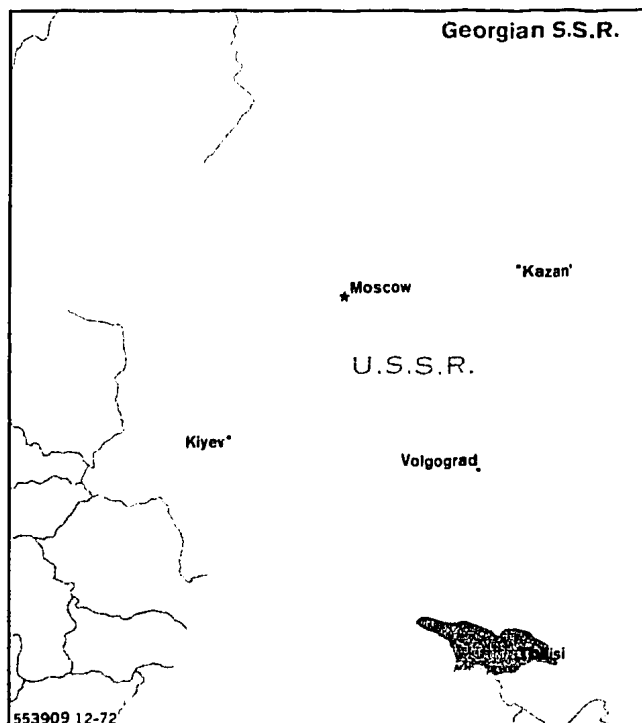
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for much of the corruption uncovered in Tbilisi. Toward the end of July, Lolashvili was demoted and finally, at the end of September and two weeks after his 70th birthday, Mzhavanadze himself stepped down. Although TASS reported that he resigned at his own request because of age, he clearly left under a cloud. The praise accorded him on the occasion of his birthday was considerably cooler than he had received at the time of his 60th birthday, and the choice of Georgia's MVD chief rather than one of Mzhavanadze's own political cronies to succeed him spoke loudly of Moscow's lack of confidence in his leadership. Since his retirement, Mzhavanadze's reputation has been further damaged by additional disclosures of the economic corruption that existed during his tenure. The exclusion of his name from a list of Politburo members who signed an



Mzhavanadze

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obituary in *Pravda* on 19 October suggests that, for all practical purposes, he is no longer considered a member of the top party body. He will almost certainly be formally removed at the next central committee plenum.

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